

From a Peace Corps Volunteer in Chile, 1963: 'We Were Had'

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BY MARY ELLEN STROTE

One night in 1964, deep in southern Chile, a small group of Peace Corps volunteers—myself included—sat nervously around a crackling old radio in an ill-heated Patagonian boarding house.

We had gathered to listen to the results of the Chilean presidential contest between Salvador Allende, the Communist, and Eduardo Frei, the Christian Democrat. We were worried: Somehow, our little band of idealistic young world-savers had become a campaign issue.

In fact, since our arrival the year before, we had been drawn into an unwilling, but significant, role in Allende's campaign. For months he had laced his speeches with denunciations of Peace Corps "spies." What if he won? Only half-jokingly, we wondered whether we should flee immediately to Argentina or wait for the Communists to kick us out.

We might have been spared all that worry if we had known what the Senate Intelligence Committee revealed earlier this month—that the Central Intelligence Agency spent 3 million American dollars to insure Frei's victory in that election. Allowing for the difference in population between the two nations, that sum was then equivalent to a \$60 million campaign contribution in the United States, and it was only the beginning of a decade of American infiltration into Chilean politics.

But, of course, we didn't know. In 1964 we still believed the maxim that had been reiterated throughout our Peace Corps training: Americans must stay out of Chile's political process. Such involvement, we were told, would be dangerous and counterproductive.

Perhaps our willingness to accept that warning—and to presume that it reflected an across-the-board State Department policy—only proved our ingenuousness. But then, we ambassadors of Camelot were probably the last generation of young people to hold an orthodox faith in American government.

Most of the volunteers with me that night were members of the fence-straddling class of 1963, neither creatures of the bland 1950s nor passionate dissenters of the 1960s. My own background was not atypical. Fresh from the Young Republican Club at USC, educated in the same conservative environment as my classmates Dwight Chapin and Donald Segretti, I felt that even joining the Peace Corps was vaguely radical.

The source of my new-found activism was not outrage, but rather a sense of moral obligation. My real motivation was the sort of youthful sympathy for the oppressed and exploited which at that time inspired HUAC.

But we early Peace Corps volunteers differed from those other activists who blossomed in the warm spring of John Kennedy's administration and flowered in the hot summer of Lyndon Johnson's. We never really put ourselves on the line, never risked going to jail or being shot at by national guardsmen. We were the darlings of the Democrats; in the eyes of the right, we were harmless (if misguided) dreamers.

Our crusade was not to change American society but to promote it. There was even something typically American about the contract that set the terms of our sacrifice. We would serve precisely two years, with free medical care included. Radicals we were not.

Still, leftist critics were mistaken when they claimed we had simply found a wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am way of easing our liberal guilt. In that innocent year of 1963 we had no real political consciences, just the earnestness and simplicity of heart that made us so well suited to the Peace Corps. We boarded the Panagra jet to Chile believing that we represented not only the resources but also the good intentions of our government.

The Chilean people generally received us well. They taught us to appreciate life at a different pace, and thankfully accepted whatever we had to offer. We took only small steps, setting up a credit union here, a cooperative nursery school there.

Then, one day in 1965, news came over our scratchy radios that American troops had landed in the Dominican Republic. Our Chilean friends began to look at us with the justifiable paranoia that unites all Latin Americans in the face of Yankee power. They cursed us for teasing them into believing that the Peace Corps truly represented American attitudes.

